



The Old Ironsides Report



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Soldier brings 9-11 experiences & memories, banking expertise to Baghdad

Story and photos by Spc. Chad D. Wilkerson, 372nd MPAD
BAGHDAD, Iraq -- He seems like he would be more at home on the seat of a Harley in a leather jacket and American flag bandana than in a cushioned palace chair in a U.S. Army desert camouflage uniform.

His profile is unmistakable: clean-shaven scalp with a mustache that dominates his features. He can rarely be seen without that confident, proud smile and demeanor that his colleagues have come to know him by.

Spc. Thomas D. Wirges, operations sergeant for the economy and commerce team, 354th Civil Affairs Brigade, an Army Reserve unit based in Riverdale, Md., has spent the last couple of months as a lead person for the bank task force in Iraq. The 354 is part of Task Force 1st Armored Division for Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The 354th's economy and commerce team, under the leadership of Lt. Col. Vanetta Ratcliffe, is working to restore Baghdad's banking infrastructure, a job that has proven to be one of the most challenging in the reconstruction of Iraq.

"My duties and responsibilities are: I am the task force lead on banking and the stock market, and organization and reconstruction of those items here in Baghdad for the economy and commerce team," said Wirges.

Wirges, a Virginia Beach, Va., resident, spent six years in the Navy and served during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. He enlisted in the Army Reserve after the tragedy of Sept. 11, 2001, to "step up to the plate and do my duty as an American," he said.

"I was in New York at Ground Zero on Veterans Day helping the firemen clean up rubble and it was a very emotional experience," Wirges said. "I believe that every American citizen has a duty to their community as well as to their country."

Wirges' accomplishments with his team have been nothing short of amazing, especially being just a specialist (E-4 pay grade) in civil affairs, a military occupational specialty that has mostly much higher rank as the norm.

Wirges said he has done numerous bank assessments in Baghdad, has worked with the U.S. Treasury, has handled money transportation from branch to branch, and continues to focus his team's efforts on "all things banking," he said.

As part of a team in the 354th Civil Affairs Brigade, trying to get Iraq back on its feet after the fall of the former regime, subject matter expertise is required, and Wirges' background and training make him experienced and qualified to handle the responsibility, regardless of his rank, he said.

"Most E-4s don't find themselves in a position as a task force lead in the assessment and re-establishment of banking procedures," he said. "My personal background is: I was an investment adviser, a broker, mutual funds manager, blue sky law and securities, plus, I also worked in the insurance industry, so I have my life and health, and property and casualty licenses.



"I have done everything from group benefits for mid-to-large-sized companies to retirement planning to selling of stocks, bonds, options, and mutual funds," he said. "So, coming into this atmosphere where you are looking at the re-establishment of banking procedures, I have some expertise in that field and understanding of the regulatory bodies that cover what we do back at home."

Wirges' strong opinions on the previous regime's handling of personal banking and accounts come out through the tones in his speech.

"Banking here can be pretty much compared to a Christmas card account or a small child's account," said Wirges. "The banking that was done here was limited to basic deposits and basic withdrawals. The concept of paying interest -- unless you were in an elite class -- you didn't receive interest."

The convictions that Wirges clings to are what keep him working so intensely on a seemingly overwhelming project.

"The Iraqi people have been under such extreme oppression for such a long period of time, it would be much easier for us to conquer them and leave them in the desolate condition that they are, but it is more important that we rebuild them so that we have a strong ally," said Wirges.

"My personal wish is that they become an economic powerhouse due to their resources; someone that we can have as a full-fledged partner on the world market. So if I, as an individual, can affect some long-term change that my children, who are 7 and 9, when they are my age and they look at what the world economy looks like, they can point to Baghdad and say, 'My dad helped change that.' There is a legacy to be had here."

With such an extensive list of accomplishments and invaluable experiences, Wirges is not your stereotypical freedom fighter. His confidence is noticeable, but his passion for his work is inspiring. The gruff biker look-alike said he will not stop until he has reached his goals, or the U.S. Army pulls him away.

NEWS

White House Staff Investigating CIA Leak

WASHINGTON (AP) - The White House staff began going back through records and telephone logs Wednesday in search of any information relevant to the criminal investigation into public disclosure of a CIA undercover officer's identity. Press secretary Scott McClellan said he had no knowledge about anyone going to the Justice Department with any information about the case, as Bush had urged. Similarly, he said he did not know of anyone hiring legal counsel.

GOP Senators May Defy Bush on Iraqi Aid

WASHINGTON (AP) - Senate Republicans pressed for speedy approval of President Bush's request for \$87 billion for Iraq and Afghanistan, even as some GOP lawmakers questioned whether Iraqis should be required to eventually pay back some of the money.

Chinese No Longer Need Permission to Marry

BEIJING (AP) - Getting married in China became easier Wednesday as new rules took effect that eliminate a requirement for couples to get the permission of their employers before they tie the knot. The new marriage rules add to a series of social reforms that increasingly are liberating Chinese private lives from unpopular government controls.

Do-Not-Call List's Future Uncertain

WASHINGTON (AP) - The national do-not-call list, hampered by a weeklong legal struggle, went into effect Wednesday, with government officials still predicting a large decline in telemarketing calls to millions of registered phone numbers. The service is at the center of a perplexing saga involving every branch of government. In the latest twist, federal officials scrambled a day before enforcement was to start to rework a system that handles complaints about telemarketers.

Chaplain's Thought for the Day: **The Value of Others**

Tales told about the stars reflect a lot about the people who tell them. The constellation now called Orion was once called Hippolyta, named for one of the Amazon queens. The Amazons were women warriors who had four leaders instead of one: two older women and two younger women. Everyone could benefit from the experience and wisdom of the older and the strength and vigor of the younger.

After Hippolyta died, they named the constellation for her to honor her and remind themselves of her wisdom and bravery.

We can draw a good lesson from the value the Amazons placed on the contribution each one could make, no matter how young or old. When we remain alert to the possibility of learning from people we hadn't seriously considered as teachers, we are reminded of our often forgotten value to others.

SPORTS

McNabb Isn't Looking for Limbaugh Apology

By ROB MAADDI

PHILADELPHIA (AP) -- Quarterback Donovan McNabb said Wednesday he isn't looking for an apology from Rush Limbaugh for a racially tinged commentary because it's too late.

Limbaugh said on ESPN's pre-game show Sunday that McNabb was overrated because the media wanted to see a black quarterback do well.

"He said what he said. ... I'm sure he's not the only one that feels that way, but it's somewhat shocking to actually hear that on national TV," the Philadelphia Eagles quarterback told reporters Wednesday. "An apology would do no good because he obviously thought about it before he said it."

Before McNabb led the Philadelphia Eagles to a 23-13 victory over the Buffalo Bills on Sunday, Limbaugh said on the pre-game show that he didn't think McNabb was as good as perceived from the start.

"I think what we've had here is a little social concern in the NFL. The media has been very desirous that a black quarterback do well," said Limbaugh, the outspoken conservative radio talk show host who joined ESPN this season. "There is a little hope invested in McNabb, and he got a lot of credit for the performance of this team that he didn't deserve. The defense carried this team."

McNabb, who was runner-up for the league MVP award in 2000 and has led the Eagles to two-straight NFC championship games, said he has no quarrel with Limbaugh's comment on his playing ability. "I know I played badly the first two games," he said.

McNabb got off to the worst start of his career this season and was the NFL's lowest-rated starting quarterback after losses to Tampa Bay and New England. Still, the Eagles are 36-22 in games he started.

He said Limbaugh's comments about his race were out of bounds and added that someone on the show should have taken him on.

A decade ago, there were few black quarterbacks in the NFL. This season, 10 of the 32 teams will have started black quarterbacks in at least one game.

Limbaugh has helped increase the ratings for "Sunday NFL Countdown." Nagle said ratings are up 10 percent overall, and 26 percent among the 18-to-34 male demographic. Sunday's show drew its biggest audience in the regular season since November 1996.

Limbaugh is best known as the radio host of the politically focused "Rush Limbaugh Show," which is syndicated in more than 650 markets worldwide. He spent most of the 1990s assailing then-President Clinton and now spends Sunday mornings talking football, a job he called "the fulfillment of a dream."

Safety Tip of the day... **LOCAL TRAFFIC AWARENESS**

There have been several incidents where 1AD soldiers manning TCPs were injured when struck by local civilian traffic. These incidents have not resulted in a death, but if not addressed will result in a serious accident.

- ✓ Do not take a position in front of a vehicle that has the engine running.
- ✓ Never turn your back to a vehicle that has the engine running.
- ✓ Use the "BUDDY SYSTEM" and cover each other.

Maintain Situational Awareness at ALL Times